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Internet makes it a small world after all

It's often said that the Internet makes the world a smaller place, although for many people that is still not a reality.

If you become familiar with some of the tools that can track your voyages through the Internet, however, you'll come away with a new respect for the fact that in a wired world, geographic location is truly irrelevant.

This was brought home to me a few years ago when I had the opportunity to try out a satellite-based Internet access system. I set the dish up in the backyard, aimed it at the sky, and hooked it up to my wife's computer.

It was fast and reliable, plus it was fascinating to realize that when we used the Internet through this system, the information was travelling from a satellite about 36,200 kilometres away.

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Thinking about such distances made me wonder to a greater degree how information travels through the Internet — particularly on the occasion when I sent an e-mail message to my wife who was working in the same room.

Before I'm accused of being a complete technonut, understand that as husband and wife, we do communicate in other ways. I had simply received a message that was of interest to her, so I was forwarding it on.

There she was, linking to the Internet via satellite, and there I was, linking to the Internet through a cable modem. How did the information get from my system to hers? It travelled an extremely long and circuitous route.

Using a DOS command known as "tracroute," I was able to establish the course the message took to go to the Internet service provider from which she retrieves her e-mail. The message left our home in Mississauga through my cable company's wire, travelling to its offices about 25 km away.

Because the cable company is a participant in the @Home network, its system then routed the packets of information through the Internet



DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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down to the main @Home network in San Jose, Calif., via Detroit, Chicago and Denver. From there, it bounced back to the east coast somewhere around Washington and then went up to be stored on a computer in Toronto.

When my wife collected her e-mail, her computer linked through a route that took her 72,400 km up and down through the satellite, then to Montreal, New York, Chicago and up to Toronto. The thing travelled close to 100,000 km to move less than two metres from my desk to hers.

If you want to get a sense of how your activities make their way through the on-line world, download the NeoTrace program — there's a 30-day trial version available at www.neoworx.com. Simply provide it with your latitude and longitude — which you can find at the Natural Resources Canada-Geomatics Canada Web site (geonames.nrcan.gc.ca) — then type in a Web address. You'll soon get a nifty map-based representation of the route used to link your computer to that Web site.

It can be a lot of fun to use. I've discovered, for example, that when I link to the Web site of this newspaper, the route goes through Buffalo, Cleveland and Chicago, even though my home office is 25 km away from downtown Toronto.

Keep in mind that the information generated by a program such as NeoTrace is nowhere near precise, and can often be dramatically wrong, given the complexities of the way in which companies are registered on the Internet.

Yet such a program can give you a good sense of the fact that in the on-line world, the concepts of time, space and location have all but disappeared.

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